

in the morning i'll call you by maximoffs

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Summary:

“New York?” Eddie asked, quickly, before he could stop himself.

“Yees? What about it?”

“Do you want to come to New York. For Christmas. To spend it with me.”

“Yeah,” Richie said.

“I mean, I know you’re super busy and all, so—”

“Shut your mouth, Eds. You’re sad and alone and in desperate need of company, so obviously I’m going to clear my incredibly busy schedule—the parties and the laughs and the orgies—to come hang out with you. It’ll be like, my very good deed of the year.”

(Eddie and Richie realize neither of them needs to spend the holidays alone.)

in the morning i'll call you

Author's Note:

i wrote this partly on the verge of a fever and then with an actual fever. i did not proofread it diligently and i can't be held responsible for any glaring grammatical errors (blame it on the fever).

Somehow they left Neibolt alive.

Bruised and exhausted like the walking dead, blood in their mouths and in their fists, but alive regardless, the seven of them, as it always was, as it always would be.

Until they got back to Derry House, of course, and Bill started talking about a group chat, and Stan rolled his eyes and said “please don’t ever contact me again” and Mike laughed so hard he slung an arm around Stan’s shoulders to hold himself up, to tell him he was never getting rid of them, to tell him something that wasn’t entirely meant for the others ears.

Eddie’s arm was in a cast and it reminded Richie so much of being 13 and drowning in the thought of him that he felt like he could panic or fly or both. *Dates in Reno*, he reminded himself. *Semi-lucrative comedy career telling semi-decent jokes. A lifetime of repression. Come on. Pull it together.*

“I’m leaving,” he said, distractedly, texting his assistant to get him a flight out. “Don’t put me in any group chat, I don’t have a phone.”

“Don’t be such a party pooper,” Bev said with a laugh. “Bill’s learning about technology. Humor him.”

“Yeah, Rich, humor us all.”

“He’d have to be funny to do that,” Eddie said seriously.

“Your mother’s funny enough for the both of us,” Richie said, still not looking up from his phone.

“Oof,” Bev said. “Not your best work.”

“You guys are,” Richie said, slowly, finally facing them. “The fucking worst. And I for one can’t wait to forget you all again—”

Bill pressed his palms to his mouth and made a fart noise. “Womp womp,” Mike said, in agreement.

“I’m leaving,” Richie announced.

“Right now? Are you going to the airport? Give me a ride,” Eddie said, and without waiting for an answer, slung one of his fourteen bags across his back.

“I’m not carrying your shit for you,” Richie said. But he knew he was. They took turns hugging everyone—he saved Bev for last—holding her a little longer than necessary.

“Bye, Molly Ringwald,” Richie said into her ear. “You were always my favorite.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Bev said back, but there was warmth in her voice, and she squeezed him tightly.

They all stood around for a while after that, half awkward, wanting to leave and shower and sleep and go home to their loved ones but also not wanted to leave, not really. Richie tossed his keys to Eddie, who just let them hit him and fall to the floor.

“Really?”

“My fucking arm is fucking useless what the fuck Richie?”

“All of you is useless! Go start the car.”

“Oh my god,” Stan said. “No. No. Bye.” And he left without another word. Mike looked after him with what could only be described as Mike-Hanlon-heart-eyes. Eddie made a face and walked out, too.

Outside, Richie packed Eddie’s suitcases into the car while Eddie sat in the passenger seat. When Richie got in the car, he gave him a sidelong smile.

“Thanks, man.”

“Yeah.”

“It’d suck to have to drive to Bangor one-handed.”

“Yeah.”

“*Yeah* ,” Eddie echoes. “Are you not talking to me or something?”

“What? Eddie, you’re insane. I’m trying to catch my breath after lifting 1,000 tons of toiletries.”

“I’m sorry your hygiene still sucks.”

Richie made a strangled noise and backed out of the parking lot. He didn’t look back. He told himself he never would.

*

At the airport they sat next to each other. Richie’s flight was boarding an hour before Eddie’s, but they still had some time to kill so they bought shitty cups of coffee and overpriced sandwiches. Eddie didn’t touch his.

“Can you believe we got out of there alive?” Richie asked, after a while, trying to make conversation. It wasn’t what he meant to ask. What he meant to ask was: How did you feel back there when you looked death in the eye and saw it looking back? Did you feel brave? Do you think whatever had been holding us together all that time is severed now? Did you know I would have died for you down there? Did you know I would have never forgiven myself if something had happened to you? Are you okay, Eddie? Are we going to be okay?

But he didn’t ask any of those things, of course. Of course he didn’t.

“No,” Eddie answered, honestly, with a laugh. “I can’t fucking believe it at all.”

“You never did have any faith, pal.”

“Can you blame me?”

“No,” Richie said. “But only because you hung out with Stan so much.”

Eddie grinned. “Stan the Man. Do you think he’ll ever forgive us?”

“For dragging him back to Derry?”

“No, for being the same exact morons we were 27 years ago.”

Richie laughed, and it almost felt easy. “Not a chance.”

Boarding began. Richie stood up. “That’s me,” he said.

“Okay,” Eddie said. He shifted to stand up, but Richie couldn’t stand it, and said “bye,” and it sounded so much like a gunshot or a window shutting closed that Eddie did not move after that, except to fold his hands tightly in his lap, and watch Richie walk away.

*

Text message from Bill Denbrough

Okay Losers! This is so we stay in touch. Please keep the bullying to a minimum.

Bill Denbrough named the conversation “Losers Club”.

Text message from Bill Denbrough in Losers Club

Now it's official. :-)

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

the fact that you do the smiley with the nose broke me

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

but on second thought it's not surprising

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

nothing should surprise me anymore

Text message from Stanley Uris in Losers Club

It would surprise us all if you learned how to text properly.

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

wtf are you talking about

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club
this is how everyone texts these days

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club
you wouldn't know because you've been 80 for the past 40 years

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club
stan the man

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club
you gotta get with the program

Text message from Stanley Uris in Losers Club
How do I opt out of this service?

Text message from Ben Hanscom in Losers Club
You could probably just block his number.

Text message from Bill Denbrough in Losers Club
I'm about to.

Text message from Beverly Marsh in Losers Club
Me too :)

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club
you guys suck

Text message from Bill Denbrough in Losers Club
Beep, beep, Richie.

Text message from Beverly Marsh in Losers Club
Beep, beep.

Text message from Mike Hanlon in Losers Club
beep, beep!!

Text message from Ben Hanscom in Losers Club
Beep beep Rich.

Text message from Stanley Uris in Losers Club

Beep, beep. :)

Text message from Eddie Kaspbrak in Losers Club

BEEP BEEP

Richie laughed despite himself. He tossed the phone on the couch and walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. He wasn't sure why he had expected anything in there to be edible, so he closed the fridge and he ordered take out instead. Then he sat in front of the TV, and ate fried rice out of the carton, and didn't think about anything at all.

Time went by. Weeks, then months. The Losers Club Group Chat remained active, and Richie realized he was more excited by his phone buzzing now than he had been in all the years he had it. Stan sent photos of his trip to Buenos Aires: cityscapes and the beach at night and him with his wife, looking so happy, as happy as he deserved to be. Beverly and Ben moved in together, they rescued a border collie and named him Burt Reynolds and sent photo after photo of his floofy belly. Richie sent back heart-eyes for every single one. In the most pleasantly surprising turn of events, Bill and Mike had decided to take a road trip together, and they sent postcards from the cities they visited.

Eddie was the quietest, which Richie hated, which only made him think about Eddie more. There were no photos, and Richie wanted to know what the inside of his home looked like, and what the rest of his wardrobe looked like, and whether his windows faced the street or a brick wall. He wanted to know what was in Eddie's fridge, what kind of ridiculous organic produce he overpaid for, and whether he had art on the walls. Richie did—he hung up classic film posters and bought overgrown plants and sleek furniture. Richie's place was surprisingly nice, but Richie had hired an interior decorator, so that wasn't entirely fair.

He could have texted Eddie, separate from the chat. He could have called him, just to say *I missed your dumb voice*. He didn't do those things. He sat in his polished, empty apartment, and focused on his work instead.

It was the beginning of December when Eddie texted them.

Text message from Eddie Kaspbrak in Losers Club

Hey guys. I got a divorce. Shut up, Richie. Anyway, I thought you should know since we're sending each other life updates now or whatever.

Text message from Beverly Marsh in Losers Club

You okay? ❤️☐Can we do anything?

Text message from Mike Hanlon in Losers Club

hey, we're here for you.

Text message from Eddie Kaspbrak in Losers Club

I'm okay. Promise.

Richie sat with his phone in his hands for 15 minutes. He put it down. He picked it back up. Then he opened up a new chat, and he typed Eddie's name in.

Text message from Richie Tozier

i wasn't going to say anything

Text message from Richie Tozier

nothing bad at least

Text message from Eddie Kaspbrak

Well I can never be too sure with you.

Text message from Richie Tozier

oh come on

Text message from Richie Tozier

if anything i'm just sad you didn't have what me and your mom do

Text message from Richie Tozier

but i think you can find it, eds

Text message from Richie Tozier

it's not too late

Text message from Eddie Kaspbrak

Very funny coming from someone who has definitely never been in love.

Richie put the phone back down. He picked it up again.

Text message from Richie Tozier

haha

He turned it off.

When he turned it on again, it was 2 in the morning, and he was in bed. Nightmares came and went—Richie had gotten used to them by now. What he had not gotten used to, could never get used to, was the look on Eddie’s face when It took hold of him, wrenching him away, twisting his arm so hard Richie heard it pop, then crunch. Richie heard the exact moment of bones shattering, and in sleep it became a Greek choir of noise, burrowing into his mouth, settling into his brain.

Richie woke up and he was paralyzed; the breath he had to take just sitting on top of his mouth, unable to reach.

When he finally took it, when he made himself touch the sheets and ground himself in the knowledge that *this was his bed* and *Pennywise was gone* and *we buried him under a house, like the fucking Wicked Witch of the West*, he turned toward his nightstand, and put his glasses on.

In the glow of the phone light he caught his breath. He typed Eddie’s name into the chat box. Without meaning to, he hit MOBILE instead of MESSAGE.

It would have been easy to hang up. Richie didn’t. Instead, he listened to the ringing and counted along in his head—waiting for whatever temporary mania had taken over him to eventually subside.

“Hello? What—hello? Is everything okay?” Eddie’s voice, bleary with sleep.

“Hi,” Richie said.

“Richie ? What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing happened,” Richie said, licking his lips. “Nothing’s wrong. How are ya, Eds?” That was good. Forget the time. Play it off like this is normal.

“Do you fucking know what time it is?”

“My clocks says 2:17.”

“In the morning.”

“Well, yeah, duh.”

“Are you drunk?”

“No I’m not *drunk*. Do I *sound* drunk?”

“What the hell is wrong with you, dude?”

Silence from Richie’s end. Eddie could hear him breathing, and not talking, and not cracking jokes, and felt himself seized with worry. Talking Richie could be infuriating, but Not Talking Richie was unfathomable. Not Talking Richie made you feel like there would never be any sun again.

“Hey, Rich.”

“Yeah?”

“I get these... really horrible nightmares sometimes. I wake up and I can’t tell what’s real. I used to have to hide them from Myra, because she’d get hysterical, you know—whatever. But I don’t think being alone has made it easier.”

More silence. Then, quietly: “Yeah.”

Richie heard shuffling on the other end, the sounds of a comforter being shifted. He didn’t think of Eddie’s body still sleep warm in it, bare feet and arms, fluffing his pillow up to the headboard so he could sit up. He looked at his alarm clock and thought of that instead, glaring red, accusing him of something.

“So Mike and Bill look like they’ve been having a good time,” Eddie said. Richie felt a surge of gratitude, the changing of the subject, the distraction.

“Yeah, can you believe it? What do you think is going on there?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “Does something have to be going on?”

“Something is always going on.”

Eddie hummed softly, thinking it over. “Maybe. Or maybe they’re just being normal fucking friends who hang out and make plans with each other.”

“You trying to say something, Eds?”

“I’m not trying to say anything.”

“It sounds like you are. It sounds like you called me at 2 in the morning because you were dying to go to the Grand Canyon with me.”

“Are you serious? I—you called me.”

“Don’t get so caught up in the details, Spaghetti. Your whole life will pass you by.”

“You’re unbearable,” Eddie groaned. “I don’t want to go to the Grand Canyon with you.”

“Still a heartbreaker, huh?”

“Shut up, Richie. I’m going back to sleep.”

“Okay,” Richie said. “Me too.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Richie thought of the twenty-two different things he wanted to say, in the secrecy of the dead of night, but he didn’t say any of them. He said, instead: “Goodnight.” He hung up.

The next day he texted Eddie: *sorry for being weird last night*, and then: *but your mom usually likes it*.

Eddie saw these texts and chose to ignore them, because sometimes the best way of dealing with Richie was not dealing with him at all. Eddie thought of how annoying he had been the entire time they were in Derry— in the clubhouse imitating Pennywise, at the Jade

just mouthing off— and he realized he missed him. He realized that being around Richie for those two days had been more exciting and more infuriating than anything he had felt in the past 27 years; and he wanted to squash the realization immediately.

What good did it do him, now? What could possibly be gained from this situation?

Eddie went about his days as peacefully as he could. He went to the Christmas market at Union Square, then to the one at Bryant Park. He saw things that reminded him of his friends, but he could not remember the last time he bought anyone who wasn't Myra a gift, and it made him too nervous to get anything at all. After he slept on it, the next afternoon, he went back, and he bought those gifts.

Since leaving Myra he had moved out; he had rented an apartment overlooking the park. It was being renovated now, because for the first time in his life he got to choose the things he liked. He stayed at a hotel in the meantime, and that was nice too, that was also the way he liked it, of his own choosing. He took some time off of work, which was easily granted, because he had never done it before.

He went to the park in the mornings with a cup of coffee and the cold made him feel like a living thing. He knelt to tentatively pet dogs on the head (another first), and when someone walking by smiled or said good morning, he did it back. He felt a little pathetic, but mostly relieved, at the realization that life could be this way.

One week out to Christmas, his phone began to buzz.

First, Beverly to the group with a photo of her and Ben, grinning cheesily in front of their tree, wearing matching Santa hats. Then another one of Burt Reynolds with antlers stuck on his head.

Mike sent the group a selfie that was mainly just Bill in the background, typing away furiously, Mike's head in the corner making a face.

Then Stan with a photo Patricia obviously took, laughing and looking away from the camera, dressed in a Hanukkah sweater. There was a giant menorah knit into it, and the words LET'S GET LIT. Eddie made

a noise, out loud, when he saw it, and clamped his hand over his mouth. *Stan the Man* .

Eddie himself sent the group a photo of the tree—*the Tree* —at Rockefeller Center, all lit up and magical in the night.

Richie didn't send anything for a day. Eddie thought about calling, just to make sure he hadn't fallen, hit his head, and died. He didn't. Then, an obviously photoshopped photo: Richie's face plastered on the body of a male model, wearing nothing but boxers with little elves on them. *Season's greetings, losers!* It made Eddie roll his eyes. It made him kind of sad.

He thought about calling.

He didn't, but Richie did.

“Isn’t it kind of sad,” Richie said when Eddie picked up, skipping the greeting altogether, “that we’re the only two spending the holidays alone?”

“Who says I’m alone?”

“Well you literally just got divorced, so I assumed.”

“Maybe I got divorced because I was having an affair.”

“Eddie, have you ever been close enough to another person’s germs to actually have sex?”

“*Fuck you* ,” Eddie said, with more heat than he intended. Or—maybe it came out exactly the way he intended. He found he was holding the phone tightly enough that his fingers had begun to cramp.

“*Je-sus* , sorry man. Didn’t think that’d be the thing that turned you into the Hulk.”

“You’re exhausting,” Eddie said. “You didn’t even say hi.”

“Hi,” Richie said.

“It’s too late now.”

“So how about it?”

“How about *what*? ”

“Come to L.A. for Christmas.” A pause. “Because nothing says the holidays like 70 degree weather, sunshine, and Adidas slides.”

“You don’t really have Adidas slides.”

“Live in them.”

“No,” Eddie said, and his voice came out so tiny and defeated that Richie burst into laughter. The sound went straight to the pit of Eddie’s stomach.

“I won’t wear them around you when you visit. Promise. There’s a flight out from JFK tomorrow at 2pm, which—”

“Richie, I can’t,” Eddie interrupted.

“Oh,” Richie said. “Okay.”

“It’s just—”

“No, it’s cool. I’m super busy anyway.”

“You’re an idiot. My new place is still being renovated, and I have to keep stopping by because I like—you know, I fucking physically cannot *help it* —stopping by every day just to check on them and see what they’re doing and whether everything is going okay.”

“That sounds like a very serious problem, Eds,” Richie said, very seriously.

“New York?” Eddie asked, quickly, before he could stop himself.

“Yeees? What about it?”

“Do you want to come to New York. For Christmas. To spend it with me.”

“Yeah,” Richie said.

“I mean, I know you’re super busy and all, so—”

“Shut your mouth, Eds. You’re sad and alone and in desperate need of company, so obviously I’m going to clear my incredibly busy schedule—the parties and the laughs and the orgies—to come hang out with you. It’ll be like, my very good deed of the year.”

“Do you know how to sleep with one eye open, Richie? Because you should probably learn.”

Richie laughed again, hard, and Eddie had to sit down on a bench and put his face in his hands because otherwise he had just become the crazy smiling man wandering around Central Park at 3 in the afternoon, crazy and smiling, smiling like crazy.

“So there’s a flight out tomorrow...”

“Book it.”

“Yeah? For real?”

“Yeah—but you should know I’m staying at a hotel.”

“I figured. With the renovation you just mentioned eighty times.”

“Can you go three minutes without exaggerating? I’m staying at a hotel but there’s a pull out.”

“Don’t stress about it, Eds. Really.”

“Okay.” And then: “I can get you from the airport.”

“I’ll take a cab. Just text me the address and stuff. I’ll let you know when I’m boarding.”

“Okay,” Eddie said. “Okay,” he said again. The miles and minutes between them seemed to stretch in the morning light. Eddie felt that wherever Richie was, whatever he was doing at this moment, wasn’t real. He was suspended in time.

“Okay,” Richie echoed. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Bye,” Eddie said. And when they hung up he thought: *have a safe flight* . He thought: *I'm so glad you called* . He thought: *I can't wait to see you*.

On the plane Richie took 2 Xanax and some Benadryl like an idiot, because deep down he was an idiot. He did not sleep; instead he felt drowsy and slightly nauseated for the 6 hour flight, and he kept thinking something terrible was going to happen, like he was going to fall asleep and wake up and the majority of the passengers would be gone, and they'd have to emergency land in Maine, and when they got there everything would be stale, like time had come and left. The thought stuck with him as he walked off the plane, and while he waited for his Uber. He texted Eddie to let him know he'd be there soon, then pressed his face against the window of the cab, and fell asleep.

By the time he was standing in the lobby of Eddie's hotel, he had already decided this was a terrible idea, and was going down a list of excuses for why he couldn't stay, actually. 1. *My agent booked three back-to-back shows without telling me, they start tonight, sorry my bad, sorry, sorry, sorry.* 2. *I scheduled wisdom teeth surgery and forgot about it until just now.* 3. *The dog-sitter called to say my dog is DYING.* 4. *The babysitter called to say my baby is DYING.*

Of course, each of these excuses had tiny problems. For one, it would be very easy to check whether Richie Tozier was performing on any given night. For another, the thought of having to talk to Eddie about any kind of medical situation he may or may not have been hypothetically having struck a terror in Richie's heart so deep it almost rivaled Pennywise. Richie was too irresponsible to have a dog, and everyone knew it. Ditto for the last thing, probably. He realized he was sweating. His hands were clammy—maybe this was the wrong hotel—maybe it'd be better to just wait outside, in the cool air, near the taxis, where anyone could just hop into one or *be kidnapped* —there was an idea, he—

“Hello ?” Eddie waved a hand in front of Richie's face. “What's happening to you?”

“Eds,” Richie said, blinking, like he'd just noticed him for the first time ever. “I took drugs.”

“Jesus,” Eddie snorted out, then took Richie by the arm and steered him onto the elevator. “You can’t just be a weirdo here, okay? It’s a fancy hotel, they’ll think you’re homeless and kick you out and if you try to tell them you’re a comedian no one will believe you because no one who works here watches anything that’s been made past the 1950’s and you dress like a homeless person.” He said this all while punching the CLOSE DOOR button repeatedly, like a weirdo.

It somehow brought Richie back to earth. He realized they hadn’t hugged. He wondered if they would ever hug—ever be the kind of friends who hugged again.

The room was nice, spacious and spotless (of course). The most Eddie thing about it was how clean it was, how much it looked like something out of a magazine. It made Richie feel kind of weird, but that could have been the medicine. He slipped his shoes off at the door and put his bag in a corner, where it wouldn’t seem too obtrusive. Then he stood there, awkwardly, wondering how implausible it *really* was to think he might have a dying dog or baby back home.

Eddie frowned at him. “Why are you being such a freak right now? Can you sit or something?”

“Am I?” Richie asked. The answer was obvious and he took a moment to reset his brain, somehow, by mentally threatening himself to. He gave Eddie what he hoped looked like an easy smile. “Sorry, man. I didn’t sleep on the plane *at all* and it felt too early for whiskey, but in retrospect maybe it wasn’t, because now I feel super crazy. I like the room, though. It’s very, ummm... ‘no one lives here’.”

Eddie rolled his eyes, but relaxed a little. “They clean it every morning.”

“And then you re-clean.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Only a little.”

Richie laughed, genuine. It made Eddie smile, and Richie told himself he could not spend the entire week noticing these things, as if they meant anything.

“Do you need to take a nap? It’s only 3— you could, if you wanted.”

“Nooo ,” Richie said. “No way. I’m totally fine.” But he had fully stepped into the room, and he was walking to the couch, and he was sitting on the couch, and he was putting his feet up on the couch. He was asleep in minutes.

When he woke up it was dark; in December it was always dark. It was enough to make you go crazy, even if you were perfectly normal before. And neither of them were. Perfectly normal, that was.

Richie blindly searched for his glasses, which must have fallen off when he passed out, his hands crab-walking around the floor around Eddie’s couch, mumbling something incoherently.

“They’re on the coffee table,” Eddie said. He was sitting at the office table and he looked like a ghost in the computer light. He hadn’t turned on the overheads, and Richie instinctively knew this was so he would not disturb him, just as he instinctively knew that it was Eddie who quietly removed his glasses from his face, and set them aside.

“Thanks,” Richie mumbled, finding them. He sat up. “Is it too late?”

Eddie finished reading whatever it was he was reading— something more boring than Dickens, Richie assumed— and looked over at him. “Too late for what?”

“I don’t know,” Richie admitted. “The day, I guess. I feel hungover.”

“The first words out of your mouth were ‘I took drugs.’”

Richie laughed. “Shit. I did.” He noticed the glass of water on the table. He took it.

“It’s not too late,” Eddie said. He came over and shoved Richie’s legs aside and sat down on the couch. Richie put his legs in Eddie’s lap,

before he could think better of it.

“That’s great,” Richie said, “because I’m starving, and I would bet your mother’s life that there’s nothing in your kitchen that’s normal to eat.”

“My mother’s dead,” Eddie said. “That’s not much of a bet.”

Richie stared at him for a moment. “So... I win the bet.”

“Jesus Christ.” A pause. “That’s not even how bets work—“ But Richie had already gotten up, was already grinning, shrugging his coat on.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Take me somewhere romantic.”

“Your version of romance is video games and sharing a bag of Doritos. I remember because that’s exactly the date you tried to take Emily Harris on in the 9th grade.”

Richie shrugged. “I got to second base though, didn’t I?”

“So you kept saying.”

“Come on, give me a little more credit than that. I prefer Sun Chips now.”

Eddie made a face. “There’s an Italian place I like—“

“Bueno! It’s-a spaghetti!”

“You can’t do that there.”

“You are like the Fun Police,” Richie said, seriously. “Fine. I’ll behave.”

The restaurant was only an avenue over so they walked, hands in pockets, with Richie taking everything in. The brownstones made him feel some type of way; they made him imagine the people inside of them, what they were cooking, whether they were laughing. He imagined them the way he had imagined Eddie, before, when he didn’t know anything about his life. Everything in Manhattan was

close enough together that it seemed hard to imagine anyone was ever lonely here, but Richie of course knew that wasn't true. People were lonely everywhere.

"Did you check on the apartment today?" he asked, looking into windows as he walked by them.

"No," Eddie said. "I thought I'd swing by tomorrow morning. You can sleep in or we can meet somewhere after."

"I'll come with you."

"To the apartment?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Well it's not... it's not finished yet."

"No, really? It's not? Is that why you're living in a hotel currently? I thought that was just for fun, Eds."

"I mean there's not much to see."

"So?"

"It smells like paint."

Richie sighed, loudly, dramatically.

Eddie scowled. "Fine. You can come. But it won't look like anything, and you'll be bored the whole time, and you'll just try to make friends with all the painters."

"God forbid. Is there a reason you're being so fucking weird about this?"

"No," Eddie said, sharply. "We're here."

He stopped them in front of a corner restaurant decorated with white Christmas lights, ivy crawling up the outer brick. Inside it was cozy, the lighting dim and warm, the scents welcoming. Richie didn't really know what he had been expecting, but it wasn't this—this *was*

romantic. It was the kind of place you came on a first or three-hundredth date, if you managed to love for that long. The hostess smiled at Eddie and greeted him by name before guiding them to a table by the window.

“You come here a lot?” Richie asked, when they had finally settled in.

Eddie shrugged. “Since my divorce, yeah. It’s pretty busy on the weekends, but good for a Thursday night.” He averted his eyes, looking down at the wine list and chewing on his lip. “I don’t think they serve Sun Chips though. Is it okay?” Something about the way he asked made Richie want to reach out and touch his hand. He didn’t, though.

“Yeah, Eds, it’s great. What else have you been doing? Since the divorce.”

Eddie shrugged again, like it didn’t matter. How could Richie possibly convey to him that it did, that everything he did mattered? That nothing else had ever mattered to Richie the way that Eddie had, and that those years had taken ahold of him, and planted themselves into a hole so deep that Richie could never have dug them out, not even if he wanted to, not even if he tried? But Eddie was an idiot. And you couldn’t explain these things to an idiot, so Richie kicked him instead, gently, under the table.

Eddie sighed. “Just... trying to figure out what I want in my life, I guess. I don’t know. It’s a lot of freedom. I’ve just been trying to learn how to enjoy things again. What about you?”

“I didn’t leave my wife.”

Eddie laughed. “After Derry, I meant. Obviously.”

“Writing.” Richie paused. “I fired my writer. I can be funny by myself.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey.”

“What ? I was being genuine.”

Richie raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah, dipshit. As much as it hurts me to admit this you’re like... the funniest person I know.”

“Well you’re a risk analyst, Spaghetti. How many people with a pulse do you actually know?”

“You know what, Richie—”

“No, no,” Richie said, putting his hands up in surrender. “I’ll take it. Thanks. Really. Thanks.”

Eddie gave him a look: half-searching, half-glare, but the waitress came by, and he ordered them a bottle of wine instead.

“A whole bottle?” Richie asked. “Trying to get me drunk?”

“No, I just thought—I mean it’s like two glasses per person—”

Richie laughed. “You’re really uptight, you know that?”

“When are you leaving, again? Tomorrow?”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Don’t *make me* be like that. And *don’t* call me Spaghetti in public.”

“So... in private...?”

“No.”

Richie sighed, exaggeratedly. “You drive a hard bargain, man.”

“You’re giving my migraine a migraine,” Eddie said, hunched over toward Richie and so deadpan that Richie threw his head back, laughing.

“God,” Richie said when he finally caught his breath. “God, I missed you.” And it was so honest that Eddie’s breath caught in his throat, and all he could manage to say back was: “Do you know what you’re

ordering?"

Richie looked at him for a moment, but Eddie buried his face into his menu, cheeks burning, and pretended not to notice. The waitress came back with their wine and asked if they were ready. Eddie ordered something that was usually two words, but took two minutes with the alterations.

"Don't forget to tell them it has to be gluten-free," Eddie repeated, while Richie hid a smile in the palm of his hand. "And nothing that has ever even *looked* at a peanut can touch my plate."

"Why would an Italian restaurant have peanuts, Eds?" Richie interrupted, trying not to laugh.

"Can you shut up?" He looked at the waitress. "Did you get all that?"

"Mr. Kaspbrak, I promise we've alerted the chef of your allergies."

Eddie nodded, and the waitress turned to Richie. "And what'll you have, sir?"

"Oh, I'm easy," Richie said with a grin. "I'll have the spaghetti."

*

After the initial nervousness subsided, they found themselves reverting back to a familiarity that was both comfortable and heart-wrenching. There were moments when Eddie felt Richie's gaze burning into him, and he wanted to ask *why?*, but he could not find the right words to follow. It made him feel unsafe, unhinged, unpredictable. It made him feel as though any moment the ground beneath him would break, and he would rush out into it, some great chasm where nothing ever comes home from. He wanted to know what it all meant, coming out the other side of this massive horror they faced together, and then remembering one another still, and then winding up in a tiny Italian restaurant on the Upper West Side as if this affection had been destined even before their lives had begun.

Richie ruined it, though. Of course he did.

“So,” he said. He leaned in, fingers steepled against his chin, smiling conspiratorially. “Bill and Mike.”

Eddie took a sip of his wine. “Yeah.”

“Who would have thought?”

“They seem happy,” Eddie said, neutrally. “Bill reached out to me after Myra and I split. I guess he and Audra had been having problems for a while, too.”

“Problems like yours?”

“No. More like... they didn’t see eye-to-eye anymore. I don’t think Myra and I ever saw eye-to-eye.”

“Why’d you marry her in the first place?”

Eddie made a face. “That’s a loaded question for Night One, don’t you think?”

“Fair,” Richie nodded. “I didn’t think Bill swung both ways.”

“Doesn’t everyone, a little?” Eddie said, surprising himself.

Richie blinked at him. “I don’t,” he said. “I definitely don’t.”

“Oh,” Eddie said. He took another sip of wine, and folded and refolded the napkin in his lap. Should he have felt embarrassed? He had never said anything of the sort out loud—never even insinuated that he could feel attraction to men. It seemed like it should have been a big moment. But Richie barely acknowledged it; his expression hardly changed. Eddie didn’t feel embarrassed, but he felt saddened, somehow. He felt like a very small light had gone out in him. “Well,” he continued with a shrug, “I’m happy for them. Mike drugged Bill and he still forgave him for it.”

Richie laughed. “Yeah, imagine if I ever pulled something like that on you.”

“You would die,” Eddie said, primly. “And they would never find your body.”

*

Eddie fronted the bill.

"We could just split it like normal people," Richie said.

"Next time," Eddie said. "Stop talking about it."

"How are you—you're leaving a *40% tip*? Are you serious? Is that how things are done here?"

Eddie gave him a look that could wither a whole rainforest. Then, quietly, he said, "I know I'm not easy for them to deal with," and hurriedly put on his coat, and brushed past Richie, out the door.

They stopped to get groceries on the way back to the hotel; Richie watched as Eddie took twelve minutes to pick out bananas. He looked at the back of his neck as Eddie lifted and prodded and studied a row of avocados; he felt a physical, gaping absence in the pit of his stomach; it felt like hunger.

"So, uh, how long does one grocery trip usually take you?"

"You can go to the room if you want. I'll give you the key."

"I don't mind," Richie said, shuffling over to where Eddie was standing, frowning at an eggplant as though it had just threatened his life. Their bodies were close enough now that Richie could feel the warmth coming off of Eddie's coat, and it hushed the aching in him for a moment. He did not remember it being this difficult when they were kids. But how could it have been? They saw each other every day. It would have been unbearable had his body not come up with some kind of evolutionary defense mechanism.

"Do you have a list? I can get the stuff that comes in boxes."

Eddie turned his frown onto Richie, as if he and the eggplant were in a league against him. Then he tentatively handed a piece of paper over and earned a smile so bright it made him regret it.

At the checkout line he looked everything over, to make sure Richie hadn't made any grievous errors, and when he was satisfied that he

hadn't, they paid and they left. Richie hated how this made him feel; he hated how normal it was. He hated that they could walk into a Whole Foods at 8:30pm and do nothing but grocery shop and have it be the most exciting errand he'd done in years. Richie didn't want to enjoy errands; he wanted to order everything online like a normal person living in the 21st century. He didn't want to stand around and fall in love with the way someone read the label on a box of graham crackers. It was absurd. It was condescending. God was condescending him.

Back at the hotel, Eddie insisted on making the pullout for Richie as if he hadn't passed out on it just hours before. "It'll take like two fucking minutes, don't be an animal," Eddie said, so Richie went and took a shower and brushed his teeth and changed into a pair of boxers and an old band tee—old enough that it was faded—and came back out with wet hair, smelling like Eddie's bodywash. He sat on the bed and they looked at one another for a minute.

"Okay then," Eddie said. "Goodnight." And before Richie could say anything but "goodnight" back, locked himself in the bathroom. By the time he was finished taking his own shower, Richie was fast asleep.

The next morning he woke to the smell of coffee brewing, and the blurry sight of Eddie in pajamas, already on his laptop. Eddie wanted to get a head start on the day—something he actually said—his exact words were "I want to get a head start on the day"—which both disgusted and delighted Richie.

As promised, Eddie brought him to the apartment, all while listing off disclaimers as they walked: "they're painting now so everything will smell bad, I brought us masks, don't worry" and "the floor probably isn't even finished" and "I had them knock down walls so the air is most likely still polluted with plaster and dust, if we breathe too much of it in we'll get cancer, but I brought masks" and "I wonder if they remembered to open all the windows while they worked and then close them again; I don't want pigeons and who knows what else making a home in my apartment" until finally Richie had to lean over, as they were walking, and put his hand down over Eddie's mouth.

“Please,” Richie said, “I’m begging you. Please stop. I can’t take it anymore.”

“You’re the one who wanted to come here so badly.”

“Because I *thought* you could be normal about this one thing.”

“Why do you think taking precautions is abnormal?” Eddie asked, walking them into the building. “Why don’t you care about carcinogens? How did you make it to forty without some kind of fatal accident involving not washing your hands?”

“Eds, it worries me that you think not washing your hands can be fatal.”

“I saw *Contagion*. ”

“I don’t think those people died because they didn’t wash their—why the *fuck* would you of all people go see that movie?”

Eddie shrugged. He stopped outside the apartment door and took a breath. “Okay,” he said, and he opened the door.

It was beautiful.

Wood floors, wall-to-wall windows, a spacious living room, and brand new appliances in the kitchen. The walls had been painted a calm off-white and the room was flooded with sunlight. There was a hallway to the right, leading to a bathroom and the master bedroom. Richie turned to Eddie with a frown.

“I thought there were, like, holes in the floor. Where are the painters? Where is the asbestos? You didn’t even put on a mask!”

Eddie shrugged again. He shrugged so much Richie was certain his shoulders were broken, and this was just something they did not, involuntarily. “I guess it’s done.”

“*You guess it’s done ?*” Richie squinted at him. “They didn’t call to tell you it was done? Look, if you didn’t want me here, you could have just said so.”

Eddie walked over to the window. He had decided to be quiet, which meant Richie would talk until Eddie yelled at him to shut up, and explained himself.

“There’s barely a paint *smell* in here, so they must have finished *at least* three days ago. Maybe even longer—”

“A week,” Eddie interrupted. “It’s only been a week.”

“Dude, what the fuck? You could have come to L.A.? Why isn’t any of your stuff here? Why are you living in a hotel? Isn’t that a waste of money? Isn’t that something a risk analyst should be better about? Is this—Eddie, is this really your apartment or are we committing a crime right now, because let me just say that this is the *lamest* crime, this is really a downgrade, I mean, I literally fucking *killed* a man. *Where is all your stuff?*”

“I didn’t bring it yet!” Eddie said. Shouted, more like. “I didn’t bring anything yet. I haven’t finished buying stuff. I keep... putting couches and lamps and coffee tables in online shopping carts and then taking them out. I keep coming here because I—I don’t know, Richie, I want things to be nice. And I want to be happy. And I bought this apartment and it’s *mine*, and I haven’t had something be *mine* in decades, and I’m so fucking scared that I’m going to move in and buy a bunch of stuff to put into it and go to sleep and wake up and that sinking feeling that has *lived* in my body for my entire life is still going to be there. I’m still going to be completely alone, trying to figure out how to live a normal life after everything that’s happened. Okay? So yes, the fucking apartment is finished, it’s ready, it’s all set, but I’m not.”

He had turned away from the window now, facing Richie, and he was yelling, one hand up like when they were kids. It took Richie three quick strides to get into his space, chests almost touching. For the briefest moment, Eddie felt embarrassed; he looked at his shoes. Then he looked up at Richie, defiant, daring him to make another joke at his expense.

Richie didn’t make a joke. He looked back at Eddie and felt an imaginary string pulling taut between them, felt all the tenderness contained in his heart for this tiny, angry human, felt it swelling

inside of him like a disease. He did something he did not think he would do; he did it before he realized he was doing it. He touched Eddie's scar, gently, brushing his thumb over it.

"You're not," Richie began. "You just have to—just say the word, and —"

"And what?"

Richie swallowed. He shook his head. "Come on," he said abruptly, pulling away. He felt the string snap. "I'm getting you a housewarming present. You can leave it here, and when you come to visit, you won't feel so alone." The words came out too quickly, and something in Eddie's expression flickered, but Richie couldn't catch what it was.

"Okay," Eddie said. Richie knew it wasn't possible for someone's eyes to be that big; he must have had them surgically altered or something. He made himself walk away. He could almost hear himself shouting at his legs *walk away walk away walk away now*, and it hurt every last remaining brain cell in his head.

They went store to store. Crate and Barrel, Williams-Sonoma, Roche Bobois. They walked into three antique shops, the last of which they were thrown out of when they came across a 3 foot, wooden sculpture of a clown and stopped to hiss at it like feral cats. They wound up at Bloomingdale's, and because Richie didn't bother to stop and read the directory they kept getting lost—first shoes, then lingerie, then back downstairs, then to the lower floors, then finally where the home decor was.

He dramatically draped himself over a velvet sofa. "Eddie my love, pass me my crystalline glass, will you?

Eddie laughed, shaking his head, but grabbed a wine glass from a nearby table and handed it to him anyway. He shoved Richie's legs aside so he could sit down, too. They faced one another and Eddie remembered a moment, twenty-seven years ago, on a hammock that felt just like this. Richie looked at him from over his empty glass, pretending to drink from it.

“Guess how much,” he said, putting a hand over the tag.

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “Half a million dollars.”

Richie laughed. “Have you ever bought a couch before?”

“No.”

“Wow. Guess again.”

“I don’t know!” Eddie insisted.

“\$3,500.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“It’s not even that nice,” Eddie said, making a face.

“It’s pretty nice,” Richie answered, getting more comfortable. “It’ll go nicely with your Gucci slippers.”

“Those were a gift,” Eddie said. Richie laughed again, throwing his head back. Then he changed positions, tucking his feet under him, on his knees so he could lean into where Eddie was sitting.

“You’re the cutest, Eds.”

“Shut the fuck up, Richie,” Eddie said, and pushed him back gently, and got up.

“I mean it!” Richie was saying, but Eddie spotted the Holiday Shop and walked away from him. He was inspecting an ornament shaped like a takeaway coffee cup when Richie caught up to him.

“I don’t even have a tree,” Eddie said.

“Let’s get a tree,” Richie said.

“We can’t just... *get a tree.*”

“Dude, what do you think people *do* every December, grow their

own?”

“I mean—where would we even get one? What would we do with it? Where would we put it?”

“Eddie... are you an alien?”

“I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

“ *Eddie* .”

“ *What* ?”

“Let’s get a tree. Pick out some ornaments. We can even get boring white lights if that’s what you want.”

“I like the rainbow lights.”

Richie beamed. “Is that a yes? Because I’ve already—” He held out his hands; there were tiny snow globes and glass balls and brightly colored animals in them.

“Fine,” Eddie said after a moment. He turned from Richie so he wouldn’t see him smiling, and picked up a sheep made out of felt. “But I want seven of these little motherfuckers.”

They left Bloomingdale’s with three bags full of Christmas lights and decorations, and two extra-large bags which mysteriously appeared in Richie’s hand when he disappeared for twenty minutes to “look at something,” and then came back and acted like he’d never even left. He refused to let Eddie see what was in it, which only distressed Eddie and delighted Richie more. They walked up Manhattan together, close but not too close, past the other last minute shoppers, trying to get everything finished before the weekend began.

“I hope it snows,” Richie said.

“Me too,” Eddie said.

“Wait, really? You?”

“Remember the year it snowed so badly I couldn’t leave the house?

Mom wouldn't even let me try to go outside and shovel, even though I was going stir crazy inside."

"How could I forget? You called Bill crying."

"You'd be crying too if you were that distressed."

"Stuck at home for a week with your mother? Sounds like heaven..."

"You're disgusting. You almost broke your neck trying to crawl in through my window."

"But I didn't break my neck, and that's the impressive part."

"You brought all my favorite comics," Eddie said, turning to Richie to smile. "You brought junk food and board games and you were so soaked and shaking cold from falling down in the snow that we had to use a hair dryer to warm you up."

"Can we talk about how I didn't break my neck? How brave I was?"

"I gave you socks for your hands and you just sat wrapped in my comforter and didn't talk for like five minutes. I think that was the longest you'd ever gone without talking."

Richie groaned.

"No one else would do that for me," Eddie said. "Not even Bill. You were the only one."

"That's probably not true," Richie said, praying this conversation would end.

"No," Eddie said, "it's true."

But they had found the Christmas tree stand and Eddie didn't do things unless he did them right so he left Richie standing there, feeling faint and exposed on his feet, while Eddie walked from tree to tree, touching their branches, completely oblivious to the internal apocalypse he was causing. Only after Eddie had chosen the perfect one, and had paid for it, and they had loaded everything up into a cab, and they had sat down in the back, and Eddie had given the

driver his actual address—the one to his real apartment—did Richie let his hand fall into the seat between them, pinkies touching. Neither of them spoke. They looked out the windows until they arrived.

They lugged the tree and all of their bags inside, and took off their shoes and coats by the door, and set it in the corner of what would eventually become the living room, by the window. The light coming in from the city outside seemed enough that neither of them moved to turn on the overheads. Neither of them felt the need to talk about what they were doing; they had silently agreed that Eddie would wrap the tree in lights while Richie unpackaged the ornaments and set them out, one by one. They worked methodically, seriously, aware that this was somehow a much graver task than simply decorating a tree. There was a garland with alternating pom poms and corgis. There were snow globe ornaments showing shopping scenes and cabin scenes and ice skating scenes, a glass taco ornament, beaded trees and crescent moons and stars, donuts and owls made of fabric and wool, one string of rainbow lights and another string of blue lights and another string of pink lights, glass balls in every color, a pickle, a taxi cab, a gumball machine, and a dozen Santas. When Richie looked at Eddie he could see him one—two—ten years from now, a Chet Baker record on, doing exactly this, an errant piece of tinsel stuck in his hair. It slayed him; it was almost too much. It wasn't enough at all.

"You're going to have to put the star on top," Eddie said.

"What? No way—it's your tree."

Eddie crossed his arms. He was looking at Richie like he was hoping he'd set on fire.

"Oh, 'cause you're too short," Richie said, matter-of-factly, definitely not smiling at all.

"I'm a normal height."

"Such a small, teeny man. Has that been hard for you, all your life?"

"You know what's been hard, Richie?"

“Me for your mother?”

Eddie smacked Richie’s arm. “Putting up with you.”

“Hop on my back,” Richie said.

“*What?*”

“But do it gently, I’m old as shit. Come on.”

“No. No way am I doing that.”

“Come *on*.”

“We just won’t have a star,” Eddie said, putting it back in its box.

“You’re a nightmare,” Richie said, taking it from him. He placed it on top. “Okay, light it.”

Eddie flipped the switch, and the room burst with light. They both grinned at each other. “Okay,” Eddie said. “I’ll admit that this was a good idea.”

“Fuck yes!” Richie said. “This means you should listen to me more.”

“No,” Eddie said with a smile. “But thank you. I kind of... don’t want to leave it.”

“No? You don’t think you’ll feel lonely in the morning?”

“Well,” Eddie shrugged. He was studying one of the corgis on the garland very intently. “I wouldn’t be alone. Technically. You’d be here, too. Anyway, it doesn’t matter, both of us are too old to sleep on a hardwood floor. I don’t think I could have slept on a hardwood floor at fourteen, either.”

“You’d probably get a splinter,” Richie said, sagely.

Eddie rolled his eyes.

“But,” Richie continued, “if you did want to stay.” He had left his separate, private bags in the far corner of the room and went to get

them now. From them he pulled out two new sleeping bags, pillows, and an extra blanket. “We could stay.”

Eddie frowned. “You bought all this just now?”

“Well, I thought,” Richie said, adjusting his glasses, “just to be safe. I knew how impressed you’d be with my tree decorating.”

Eddie’s face broke into a smile. “I’m more impressed with your foresight.”

“Is that a *real* Eddie Kaspbrak compliment?”

“Don’t get too used to it.”

“I got us pajamas, too. And toothpaste.”

“*Toothpaste?*” Eddie looked positively thrilled.

“Yeah, man... keep it in your pants.”

“I’ll order takeout.”

“Tell them they can keep the fortune cookies.”

Eddie laughed. Then he stepped forward, before he could stop himself, and put his arms around Richie, quickly, tightly. “Thanks,” he said into his ear. Richie felt it was best for everyone involved that he did not try to answer.

It couldn’t have been anyone’s idea of a perfect holiday night, but it was Richie’s. They laid the sleeping bags and pillows out and Richie lit some candles he bought and they ordered too much chicken and fried rice and dumplings. They ordered a bottle of red wine, too, because that’s what technology was made for, and passed the bottle between them.

“You’re really letting loose, Eds. You don’t know what kinds of diseases I might have,” Richie said, handing him the bottle.

“I’ll take my chances,” Eddie replied comfortably.

Richie whistled. “You’re a whole new man.”

Eddie didn’t respond; he took a sip of wine instead, looking thoughtfully up at the tree. Then he looked at Richie.

“You know,” he said, “no one else would do this for me, either.”

Setting the bottle down carefully, he leaned in and kissed Richie on the cheek. Just like that. Without warning. And the thing about Richie was that even though he was strong, and even though he had self control and entire *decades* of repression under his belt, he was still only a mortal man. He turned his head and kissed Eddie full on the mouth, and when Eddie didn’t scream or pull away in disgust, Richie cupped his face with both hands and kissed him harder. Somehow, incredibly, Eddie’s only response to this was to slide closer and kiss Richie back, a hand flying up to rest on Richie’s shoulder. When they pulled away, simultaneously, as though coming to their senses, Eddie stared wide-eyed at Richie for half a minute, willing his mouth to move, to say something.

What he said was: “I have to clear the containers or the rats will come.” *Like a fucking... alien fortune teller robot who learned how to speak English in the test tube of a spaceship.*

“Oh,” Richie said, looking at him like he’d grown three heads, which Eddie did not notice, because he was already on his feet, and taking away Richie’s half-eaten sweet & sour chicken. “I wasn’t done with that,” Richie mumbled, and Eddie did not notice this either. He gathered up their chopsticks and napkins and stuffed them into the takeout bags and was out the door, down the hall, to the trash chute. And then he sat down, *on the floor*, next to the *trash chute*, and thought only about the deep breaths he was taking.

Text message from Richie Tozier
oh boy

Text message from Stanley Uris
What did you do?

Text message from Richie Tozier
oh come on

Text message from Richie Tozier
give me a little more credit here

Text message from Richie Tozier
okay fine i think i'm in trouble

Text message from Stanley Uris
Just tell him how you feel, Richie.

Text message from Richie Tozier
no!! that's weak! that's what quitters do!

Text message from Stanley Uris
Can you at least try to be serious?

Text message from Richie Tozier
stanny what you don't GET

Text message from Richie Tozier
is that this is possibly

Text message from Richie Tozier
the most

Text message from Richie Tozier
serious thing in the world for me

Text message from Stanley Uris
Talk me through it.

Text message from Richie Tozier
man, i don't know. i mean... i've

Text message from Richie Tozier
this has been my whole life, you know? my entire life.

Text message from Stanley Uris
By "this," you mean...?

Text message from Richie Tozier
eds.

Text message from Stanley Uris

Don't you think it's unfair to both of you that he doesn't know that?

Text message from Richie Tozier

things are so good between us right now though. he's been showing me around the city, and we got a tree together, and then i kissed him, and then he ran away...

Text message from Stanley Uris

Excuse me? Can you call?

Text message from Richie Tozier

no i'm in his living room he'll be back any minute and probably throw me out the window or something

Text message from Stanley Uris

Don't be ridiculous. He hates committing crimes.

Text message from Richie Tozier

hahahaha fair. i thought we were committing one earlier but he was just being a freak

Text message from Stanley Uris

You kissed?

Text message from Richie Tozier

yeah man. couldn't have done it without you.

Text message from Stanley Uris

I can't believe you remember that.

Text message from Richie Tozier

yeah, well.

Text message from Richie Tozier

you were always good at keeping secrets. i appreciated it.

Text message from Richie Tozier

hey, does your wife know about us? 😊

Text message from Stanley Uris

Of course she does. She knows everything.

Text message from Richie Tozier

damn. of course she does.

Text message from Stanley Uris

Just relax. He's your best friend. Maybe it was easy to move on and forget all those years ago, but after everything we went through? Don't you think you deserve a second chance?

Text message from Richie Tozier

maybe.

Text message from Stanley Uris

I know this is hard for you, but don't be an idiot.

Text message from Richie Tozier

THANKS, BUDDY.

Text message from Stanley Uris

You know what I mean. Let me know how it goes. Love you.

Text message from Richie Tozier

yeah, yeah. you too. 

Richie put his phone down and suddenly it's 1992, and he's 16 again, at a school dance none of them really want to be at. He feels too lanky, too ill-matched for his suit, like only boys who know how to slow dance and sit still and sweep girls off of their feet wear suits with ties. He doesn't want to sweep girls off of their feet, he can fully acknowledge this to himself now, but it's still ugly, and he still pushes it down and never says anything about it, not even to his closest friends, who will surely pull away from him if he does.

His mother says he looks handsome and offers him a ride to the school, but Richie wants to take his bike and meet Stanley first, who is just calm enough to settle him down until they get there.

"I hate this," Richie says as they walk together, alongside their bikes, because Stan refuses to get on and ruin his suit. He looks great in a suit, Richie notices. Not *notices* but notices. He looks like he belongs in a suit. "Why do we have to do this anyway? I don't want to go."

"Why are you going, then?"

Because Eddie's going to be there, and he's also going to be in a suit.

Richie mumbles something about his parents wanting him to go. He's a good kid, at the end of the day. Stan looks at him sidelong and knows it, too. Richie Tozier, despite his trashmouth and restless entire body syndrome, is good. He is kind and he is loyal to a fault, and he makes terrible jokes to cover up his insecurities, and all he wants is to make his friends laugh. Stan stops walking and puts the kickstand on his bike up. He circles around their bikes, and he takes Richie's face in his hands, and he kisses him. It's gentle and it's chaste but it's the first time, and Richie feels flustered despite himself.

"What... what? What?" Richie asks. "What?"

"Now when you do it for real, it won't be as scary," Stan says simply, and releases his bike, and begins walking again.

"How did you? But you're not—" Richie is saying, babbling, catching up to him. "Are you? Because I'm not."

"No. But don't lie to me," Stan admonishes with a tiny frown. "I just kissed you."

"How'd you know?"

Stan shrugs. "I'm observant, *and* I have eyes." He laughs. "Is it love?"

"What?"

"I've never been in love. I just wondered what it feels like, or if I'll ever have that."

Richie considers this. Of course it has occurred to him that all seven of them have insecurities or feel incompetent at times. But Stan the Man? He's so put-together and ordinary in his own strange way; he's so good-natured and sensible that Richie has never thought that maybe he doesn't see how great he is, either. Like the rest of them.

"Of course you will, Stan," Richie says. Stan smiles at that. "And... yeah, I think it's love."

"You should tell him," Stan says, making it seem so casual, so easy.

Maybe it could be easy.

But it isn't—it isn't easy then, and now, as Richie sat in the light of the Christmas tree, in the middle of a living room Eddie was too nervous to furnish, Richie felt that it wasn't easy now, either. He changed, and he brushed his teeth, and he got into one of the sleeping bags. He turned on his side and he closed his eyes. A few moments later, when Eddie came back, he changed, and he brushed his teeth, and he pulled the sleeping bag next to Richie's before getting into it. He turned on his side, too, so they were back to back.

And he said "goodnight" out loud even though Richie was pretending to be asleep, because for as long as Eddie had lived, and even when he had forgotten, there had always been a part of him that wished Richie Tozier a good night, every night, before falling asleep.

*

When Eddie woke up, Richie wasn't there.

He had missed his alarm, somehow; or he had forgotten to set it. He turned onto his back, and then onto his other side, and he stared at the rumpled sleeping bag where Richie's body had been. After a long moment, Eddie sat up, rubbing at his eyes. He had lived through an abusive childhood, a loveless marriage, and a killer clown, so this would not be the thing that broke him. It would not be.

Eddie stood up, stretching, and felt it in every one of his bones. He had heard that acid left trace amounts of itself in your spine—that people who took acid could crack their backs and feel temporary highs, right out of the blue. He wondered if this would be something like that, too. Every aching joint bringing to mind an empty sleeping bag, the taste of red wine on his best friend's lips. He should not have slept on the floor. He was too old for it.

Eddie rolled the sleeping bags up, first Richie's, then his own. He stashed them back in the bag and tucked the bag away in the linen closet. Next he walked into the bathroom and splashed some cold water on his face. He didn't even have towels; he let himself air dry. He did these things like the living dead, moving just to move, feeling nothing at all.

When he walked back into the living room, Richie was fumbling at the door, a carrier of coffee in his hand, a bag and keys in the other, and a separate, smaller bag in his mouth.

“Brffff-mffff!” he said cheerfully, as he closed the door behind him.

Eddie blinked at him. He made no move to help. Slowly, calmly, he said, “you could have left a note.”

Richie set the bags down on the kitchen counter. “I didn’t have a pen. Or paper. There’s *nothing* in here, you know.”

“Phone.”

“Dead.” Richie walked over to him with their coffee and extended one. “Peace offering? Don’t be mad. You think I’d just leave?”

Richie didn’t reply as he took the cup and took a sip. Oat milk latte, no sugar. *How’d he know?* But that was a stupid question—Richie knew him better than anyone.

“Eds,” he said. Some of the pep had gone out of him. “I thought you’d still be asleep when I got back. You’ve got to know I’m not that much of a piece of shit.”

“It’s not about you,” Eddie said, finally. He turned to take a peek inside one of the bags, which had an assortment of pastries in it: danishes and croissants and chocolate babka. He reached for the other one, which smelled like bagels, but Richie reached out and touched his shoulder and turned Eddie back to look at him.

“You don’t have to be alone anymore,” he said. “You never have to be alone again.”

“I’m hard to deal with,” Eddie said, quietly, echoing the sentiment from the restaurant, the one that broke Richie’s heart. “I wasn’t surprised when I woke up. Nothing even happened, and—”

“Whoa,” Richie interrupted. “Nothing *even happened* ? I’ve been working up to that for 30 fucking years, buddy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really, you asshole.”

Eddie smiled. “Really?”

“You took my fucking chicken, too. Right out of my hands. You looked like a crazy person, I mean, I really thought I broke you. And now it’s *nothing even happened* .”

Eddie laughed, covering his face with his hands. “I just meant—it could have been better.”

“Holy shit,” Richie said. He looked up at the ceiling, running his hands through his hair. “Unbelievable.”

Eddie was still laughing, one hand on Richie’s arm now. Richie wanted to super glue it there, which was a completely insane thought that only a completely insane person would think. Eddie leaned into him, his face close to Richie’s chest. Richie felt his breath huffed out against him, and he missed it when Eddie finally stopped. They looked at one another, that close.

Richie kissed him. It was soft; it was gentler than the night before. He pulled away just to kiss him again.

“You’re not hard to deal with,” he said.

Eddie snorted, quietly.

“God, Eds. You’re like... the best part about this stupid city. You’re the best part about my stupid life. You’re my favorite person.”

“You’ll break my mother’s heart, Richie.”

Richie laughed, and kissed Eddie again, and this time Eddie kept him in place, and kissed him back. He opened his mouth, let Richie in, let himself taste the coffee on Richie’s tongue. It was like waking up; somehow it squashed the dead feeling inside of his stomach. Eddie’s hand clutched at Richie’s shirt, crumpling it up in the front, until he pulled away with a scowl, scoring a weak sound of protest in reply.

“You wore pajamas out to get breakfast?”

“Uh—”

“Really, dude?”

“Can you put your tongue back in my mouth?”

“Can we eat first? You taste like coffee creamer.”

“Why’s that hot when you say it?”

Eddie rolled his eyes to distract from the blush creeping up his neck; he grabbed a bagel and a napkin and hopped up on the counter. Richie took his own and leaned against the counter, looking up at Eddie.

They ate in silence for a while, comfortable, enjoying one another’s presence.

“What do you want to do today?” Eddie asked, after a moment.

“Four days until Christmas... got any last minute shopping to do?”

“No,” Eddie said. “I bought you all your gifts at the beginning of the month.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you get me?”

“Isn’t this enough for you?”

“No, you asshole, I want a real gift. Maybe a blowjob.”

Eddie smacked him on the head.

“*Ow* —anyway, I know exactly what I’m getting you.”

“What’s that?”

Richie kissed Eddie’s knee, which was hovering right in kissing range. “It’s a surprise.”

Eddie smiled; he finished his bagel; he thought he could grow to really love the holidays after all.

“Do you think we should, like, talk about this?”

Richie groaned. “Do we have to?”

Eddie hopped down from the counter. “How’s it going to work? Long distance? What, we’re going to FaceTime every night? You’re gonna go on the road and keep weird hours and forget your charger half the time anyway, which means I’m just going to be worried and waiting around, feeling like an idiot? I just got this apartment, I can’t move to California, and anyway it’s not really—I mean, can you imagine me in California, really? And—”

“Do you get tired?” Richie interrupted. “I get tired just watching you; you *must* get tired. Like the little hamster running that wheel in your brain is out of breath and suffering from all kinds of lung conditions; he’s about to drop dead any minute.”

“And *anyway*, you haven’t actually clarified what you want out of all this! It’s one thing to say romantic things but it’s another entirely to make concrete plans and commit—”

“God, fuck, Eds, what do you want? You want me to get down on one knee?”

Eddie’s eyes widened. He stopped talking.

“You want me to make the call, have all my stuff shipped over?” He took Eddie by the shoulders. “Whatever it is, man, like. Look, I just want to be with you. I just want to be around you and make you crazy for the rest of your life. I’ll move to the city, I’ll call you every morning and every night when I’m away. I’ll take you to dinner forever, wherever you want. You just have to want it, too.”

“What if we don’t work?”

“You think there’s a chance of that?”

“There’s a chance of anything,” Eddie said with a shrug.

Richie bit his lip. “If we don’t work out, Eds, it’s like... we’re losing. It’s like we’re losing a challenge.”

“I hate losing.”

“I know.”

“I think I wanted this the day I met you,” Eddie said. He kissed Richie, hard. “And we’re not fucking losing.”

*

The next few days leading up to Christmas were so ordinary and domestic, Richie would have gagged if it weren’t everything he’d ever wanted—the realization of which made him want to gag even more. They finally bought furniture, Eddie making the executive decision on everything and Richie making helpful comments like “what if we installed a mirror on the ceiling above the bed?” and “you should get this pillow shaped like the eggplant emoji.” Eddie’s taste was impeccable, it turned out, much better than Richie’s interior designer.

“You should have been an interior designer,” Richie even said, one night, sprawled across the new couch (*not* worth \$3,500, but still quite nice, thank you very much), his head in Eddie’s lap. “You’d really excel at it.”

“And have to see other people’s messy homes?” Eddie wrinkled his nose. “No thanks.”

“How do you deal with witnessing other people’s messy... risks?”

“You really don’t know what I do for a living, do you?”

“No, explain it to me.”

“Are you going to listen or pretend—” But Richie was already fake-snoring. “I hate you.” Richie looked up at him, grinning like an idiot. Eddie crept a hand under Richie’s shirt, resting it on his belly.

“Maybe you should have analyzed the risk of dating a comedian,” Richie said, earning an eye roll. “Shit, we should probably tell the

others.”

“Oh, yeah. Maybe we can invite them down to celebrate New Year’s with us.”

“Uh huh,” Richie said, taking his phone out of his pocket, and snapping a photo of Eddie that was primarily half of his chest, his neck, and some of his face.

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

[photo attached]

i'm tapping this now. you can all finally breathe

Text message from Richie Tozier in Losers Club

[another photo attached, this time of eddie glaring down at him when he's realized what just happened]

“You’re not tapping anything,” Eddie said, snatching Richie’s phone out of his hands. “You will never tap anything ever again.”

“What? Come on. You can’t possibly say no to... all this.” Richie gestured at his body. He could hear his phone vibrating in Eddie’s hands.

“Just did.”

“Your boner says otherwise.”

“Those are my keys.”

“Those are not— *why*,” Richie said, sitting up, scooting his butt over Eddie’s legs so he could look him in the face. He missed Eddie’s hand on his skin immediately, but brushed it off, thinking there were definitely more important matters to be addressed. “*Why* do you keep your keys on you in the house?”

“In case of emergencies,” Eddie said, as if it were obvious.

“What... what?”

Eddie laughed. “I’m kidding. I just forgot. You were talking too much again, and I forgot what I was doing. Did you really mistake keys for

my dick?”

“Nah, I just wanted an excuse to bring it up.”

“I’m kind of surprised it took you this long.”

“Not for lack of thinking about it though, Eds, I can assure you. I think about it *all* the time.”

Eddie rolled his eyes again, but this time he leaned in and kissed Richie softly on the mouth. He pressed his forehead against Richie’s. “Can we take it slow?” he asked, and it was so tentative and soft spoken that Richie wanted to wake the dead, and gather up every moment that terrified Eddie into feeling this way, and set the world on fire.

Instead, just as quietly, he asked, “Germs?”

Eddie nodded.

“As slow as you want, babe. I’m not going anywhere.” He kissed Eddie, and he took Eddie’s hand, and kissed that too: a promise. Then he scooted back into position, lying down, his head back on Eddie’s lap.

Eddie looked down at him, remembering the kid who held his face and yelled at him to look at him instead of the bloody, maniacal clown staggering toward them; the man who held his face in a sewer and reminded him that he was brave, and capable, and worthwhile. Eddie looked at Richie and saw for the first time something he had never before regarded with anything other than stale resignation. He saw a future. And when Richie said he would stay, Eddie believed him. He believed him.